

COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and
restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.
Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

VOL. III. NO. 12

SAN DIEGO, ALTA CALIFORNIA, MAY 29, 2009

PRICE: FREE

A Landmark Saved: Couts Restoration, 1930-1945 Part 3

Victor A. Walsh

District Historian

San Diego Coast District

Cave Coutts Jr.'s remodel of the historic building played upon the refrain of an imagined past. The building was not a "...magnificent specimen of real California architecture..." but the Cosmopolitan Hotel remodeled in a Steamboat Revival architectural style. The historic adobe walls and other features of the casa were concealed beneath cement stucco façades. Balconies and porches that never existed in Bandini's time were decorated with white vertical lath. "These inaccurate and commercially motivated remodels, always conducted under the claim of authentic restoration representing California's romantic Spanish past," concludes Ione Stiegler and her team in their *Historic Structure Report*, "would characterize the Casa de Bandini from the 1930s to the present day (2004)."

Although not an authentic restoration, Coutts made an invaluable contribution to the future of historic preservation and today's restoration of the Cosmopolitan Hotel. By 1930, when he renovated the hotel,

the depression had made it prohibitively costly for contractors to replace existing building materials with shipped goods. To economize, his contractor (Day) salvaged and reused a wide variety of materials from the Seeley hotel, including porch roof decking, beams, purlins, and even balcony posts. His workers boarded-up many of the original doorframes, windows, and other open spaces on the second story with roof decking from the veranda of the old hotel before they applied the stucco. These sections stand out from the redwood clapboard siding, providing a perfect blueprint of the locations and dimensions of the doors and windows of the original Cosmopolitan Hotel. In addition, the stucco protect the clapboard and square-top iron cut nails from the elements.

State Parks staff also removed sections of the stucco from the first floor of the Calhoun Street wing. To everyone's surprise, the adobe block, which dates back to the Bandini era, is in very good condition, except the first-floor kitchen area, where moisture and rat infestation have taken a dreadful toll since the 1970s. Nobody expected the majority of the adobe brick walls to be in such good condition because non-porous materials like stucco trap moisture, which causes adobe to

melt and eventually crumble.

A thick lime plaster had been applied to the chicken wire covering the adobe block. It helped insulate the adobe from the stucco, allowing it to breathe and wick away moisture. Coutts' workmen had used it not to protect or preserve the adobe, but rather to apply the stucco finish to the wall.

What can we conclude? Coutts' work crews salvaged and reused many building materials from the Cosmopolitan Hotel and even earlier. This may have stemmed from the 'hard times' of the Great Depression, or a tradition of frugality common in many building trades back then unlike today, or perhaps the difficulty of obtaining readily available materials from local outlets. In certain areas of construction, such as the brass pipe in the bathrooms and tongue and groove Doug fir flooring on the second floor, Coutts did not scrimp on money,

Nonetheless, there was a concerted effort to reuse existing material, which has preserved entire sections of on-site historic fabric and architectural features—the single most important source of information to a fuller understanding of a building's construction history. In doing this, Bandini's grandson help save a family historic landmark.

